Editorial: New MWRA chief's first big test: a cleaner Charles River

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We know what an asset we have in the Charles River. On any given morning, the river is filled with runners, rowers, cyclists and walkers. It serves as a front yard for some of the most valuable real estate in New England and as a gathering place for residents, students, tourists and workers. Just over a week ago, the Head of the Charles once again drew competitors and spectators from around the world. Yet the river's value extends far beyond a single weekend. It is an everyday economic engine that strengthens neighborhoods, supports recreation, boosts property values and enhances Greater Boston's competitiveness.

It is time to start viewing the Charles for what it also is: economic infrastructure.

City and state officials readily understand the return on investing in roads, bridges and transit systems. We fund them because they help attract talent, businesses, visitors and capital. The Charles River does much the same thing.

That engine depends on the river being clean.

The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority and partnering cities have spent years developing a plan to address “combined sewer overflows,” or CSOs, the discharge of untreated or partially treated mixtures of stormwater and wastewater into the Charles, Alewife Brook and Mystic rivers during heavy storms.

The current draft of the MWRA plan stops short of eliminating all remaining overflows, allowing some discharges to continue into the future, and that could undermine decades of progress.

That draft plan would require roughly $1.3 billion in investment and includes major improvements. The city councils of Cambridge, Boston and, just last week, Somerville have adopted resolutions opposing the current draft plan and calling for stronger infrastructure, stronger CSO controls and, ultimately, CSO elimination by 2050.

The public comment period is open until this Friday, Oct. 30, and we would encourage business owners and residents who value a clean river to weigh in on this issue.

The Charles River is one of the region's greatest success stories. Thirty years ago, the river was notorious for pollution. Sustained investment transformed it into a waterway that residents actively use and enjoy. The answer should be obvious: When cleanup investments generate measurable benefits, we have to finish the job.

The debate has centered largely on cost. But the full math isn't being factored in. Laura Jasinski, executive director of the Charles River Conservancy, argued in a Business Journal op-ed last week that a healthy Charles River should be viewed through the same economic lens as a roadway or bridge. There is an opportunity cost to stopping short of eliminating sewage outfalls and fully protecting the Charles River and Boston Harbor watershed.

The additional cost to ratepayers in MWRA communities has been estimated at roughly $100 per household per year, or less than $10 a month. Most households spend more than that on coffee in a single day. The draft plan itself notes that most households are not expected to face significant financial hardship from compliance costs.

For newly appointed MWRA Executive Director Jonathan Gulliver, this presents an immediate opportunity for leadership.

Coming from a transportation background, Gulliver understands that infrastructure investments are judged not only by cost but also by return. He should bring that same mindset to the river cleanup plan by communicating more clearly with member municipalities, building stronger coalitions among local leaders and advocacy groups, and recognizing the economic case for a permanent solution.

The region gets one chance to do this right. A clean Charles River is not simply an environmental goal. It is infrastructure that generates economic activity, attracts investment and improves quality of life. The return on investment will come only if the cleanup is completed fully and correctly the first time.